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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3637

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4012

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 001329

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN; STATE FOR MED

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/22/2019

TAGS: SOCI PGOV TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: RESPIRATORY ILLNESS APPEARS TO STRIKE AREA SCHOOLCHILDREN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Embassy local staff and Embassy contacts are talking about the large numbers of students who are sick this third week of October, with what they are calling the flu. Some have said that this is just the annual flu season, brought on by the changing weather and the temperature differences between night and day. Others are saying that an unusually large number of students are not in school, and some have been hospitalized. The pre-school-age son of a contact from another embassy was hospitalized with "flu-like" symptoms. In a country where the government insists that there are no serious health epidemics, such as HIV or H1N1, it would be difficult to ever get official confirmation of this apparent spike in illness or its cause. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy local staff are talking about large numbers of students staying home from school in late October because they have the flu. One local employee said that in his niece's university class, 30 percent of the students were absent, and one was even hospitalized. Another local employee reported that when she went to the pharmacy to buy cold medicine, there was a long line of parents purchasing medication for their sick children. Locals are referring to what is ailing everyone as "the flu," but symptoms vary broadly. Several local employees were out sick on Monday, 19 October, with runny noses and coughs, but were back at work the next day. Some local staff maintain that children are coming down with the usual seasonal colds and flu, brought on by significant temperature differences between night and day.

Nevertheless, the number of children who are sick certainly appears to be more than in previous years for this time of year. Local staff also note that many children are catching colds because they are participating in practice sessions for the Independence Day events and are forced to wait outside without coats from the early hours of the morning and late into the evening. However, they do this every year, in similar weather.

¶3. (C) The Pakistani Defense Attach (please protect) told DATT that he had to send his youngest child, who is still too young to attend school, to the hospital for the flu. His son is home now, and appears to be recovering. His older

children attend the USG sponsored Ashgabat International School, where many Embassy children study. In addition, other defense attaches, whose children attend the Russian school, have mentioned that "half the Russian school" was out with the flu.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The Turkmen government has a policy of not reporting outbreaks of serious illness. Contacts with Medecins Sans Frontieres told us that sometimes physicians and hospitals will turn away the very sick, in order not to increase the statistics on illness the hospitals should report. Medecins Sans Frontieres' access to local hospitals and information about the state of healthcare in this country are the reasons why the organization's contract to work here was not renewed. It is likely that the Turkmen government will never provide information about what is causing the current illness and would never confirm a serious outbreak.

END COMMENT.

CURRAN